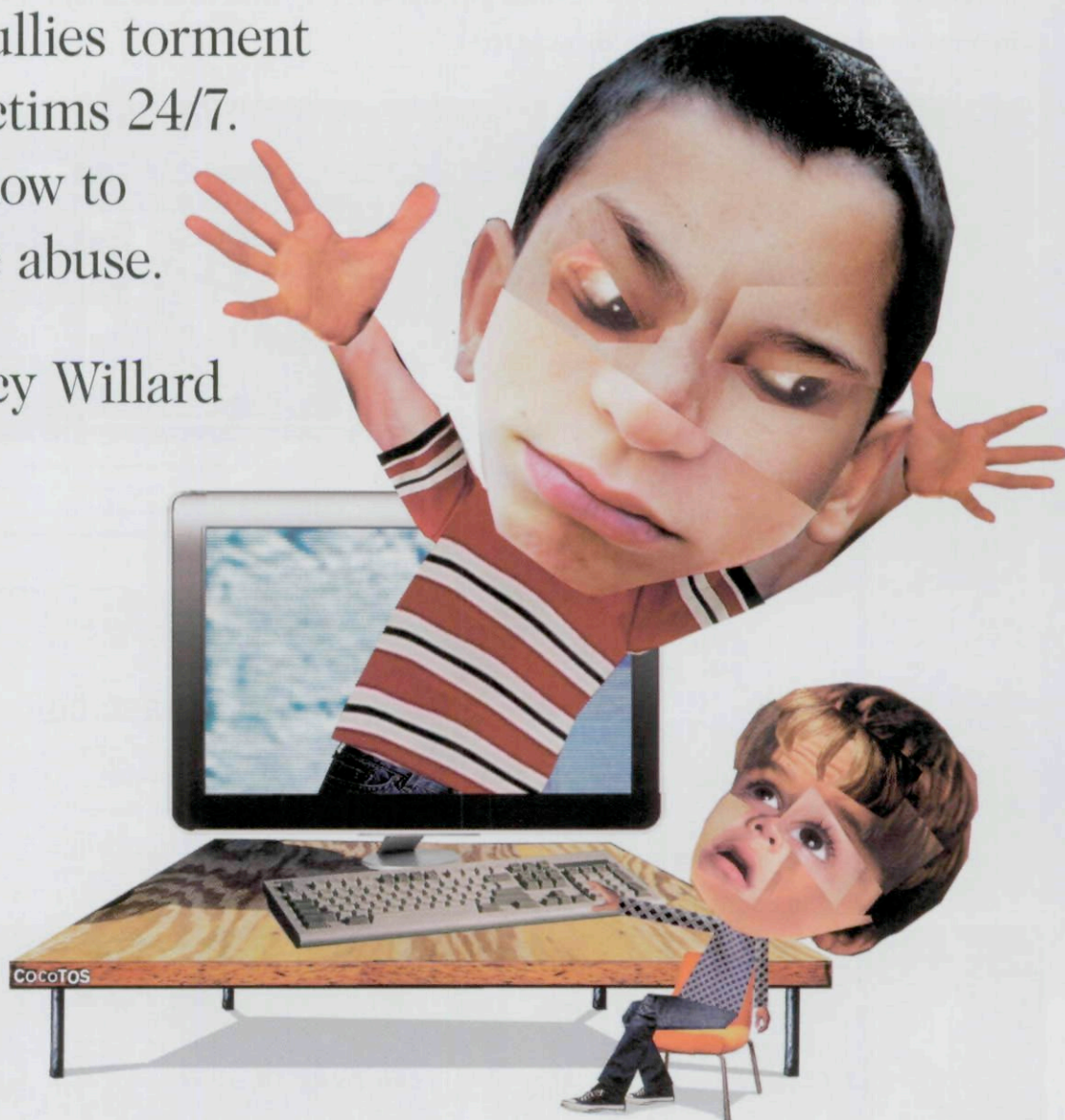


# FLAME RETARDANT

Cyberbullies torment  
their victims 24/7.  
Here's how to  
stop the abuse.

By Nancy Willard







**SARA, AN EIGHTH GRADER**, enters her middle school library, which draws the attention of Molly, the school's media specialist. Lately, the teen has seemed depressed. Now, as Molly watches Sara using a computer in the library, she grows even more concerned. Sara is reading something online that is obviously upsetting her. As Molly approaches, Sara quickly switches screens, then logs off. Grabbing her books, the girl rushes from the library in tears.

What is going on here? Molly suspects that Sara may be the victim of cyberbullying.

Welcome to social cruelty, 21st-century style. Like traditional bullying—a sad facet of growing up that's plagued youngsters ever since the first schoolyard brute shook down the little kids for their milk money—the cyber variety centers on the abuse of others, this time using the Internet and other digital age tools. Cyberbullies post angry and vulgar messages in online “flaming” wars or hack into a peer's e-mail account to wreak havoc, assaulting the reputations and already fragile egos of their young victims (see “Cruel Words” p. 56).

While face-to-face bullying has long been recognized as causing psychological harm to targets, cyberbullying can be just as damaging. The devastating effects include low self-esteem, poor academic performance, depression, and, in some cases, violence, even suicide. Online abuse can be especially vicious and for victims, there is no escape. The abuse is ongoing, 24/7. Hurtful Web posts are broadcast worldwide and are often irretrievable. Cyberbullies can remain anonymous and secretly solicit the involvement of unknown “friends.” Emotionally traumatized, young victims may be reluctant to tell adults about abusive online material or text messages, fearing retribution or the restriction of their own Internet or cellphone privileges.

So let's return to Molly, our librarian. What should she do after witnessing an incident in which she suspects that Sara is being victimized? First, she must consider the issue of student privacy. What standards has the school established regarding children's privacy on the Internet? Does Molly have the

authority to check Sara's online history file to determine the problematic site? Molly's school, like most, probably doesn't have a formal policy regarding Internet use. And it should.

A policy would serve to remind students that the school's Internet connection is an instructional tool, not a personal access system. Moreover, there should be clearly defined standards for online privacy, which should reflect the same regulations the school applies to student lockers.

So let's look at the situation from a “locker search” perspective. Molly walks down the hall and sees several boys congregated around a locker interacting in a way that is clearly suspicious. When the boys see her, they slam the locker shut. Will Molly ask the locker's owner to open it for further investigation? Of course.

The same procedure should apply to student activity on the Web. School policy should state that student Internet use in school will be supervised and monitored and that individual searches of their online activities can occur, given reasonable suspicion of abuse or unsafe use. Any staff member who suspects a problem should have the immediate responsibility of evaluating the history file of the student's activities. Further analysis of a student's records of use can be authorized by an administrator and conducted by computer services staff. These monitoring policies are critically important since schools are liable if a student's Internet use results in harm. (For more tips regarding Internet policies, visit [csriu.org/online/docs/pdf/srui/sruilisting.html](http://csriu.org/online/docs/pdf/srui/sruilisting.html).)



Let's presume that Molly examines Sara's history file and discovers that the teen was viewing a Web site, apparently created by other students, that contained cruel and nasty comments about her. No wonder Sara was upset. Should Molly inform the school counselor and principal? Absolutely. Intervention is necessary to protect Sara from further harm and prevent the incident from escalating.

Molly must now download and preserve all of the evidence she has discovered. She may also evaluate whether or not she can determine who is involved and whether similar harmful material has been posted elsewhere. Molly might also search Sara's own posts, which may provide further insight. However, it may be necessary for Molly to conduct this search at home, as many school districts are blocking access to social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, which are popular communication networks among kids.

Now, let's say, Molly has located Sara's blog, where her posts reveal that the girl's been confronted by bullies on campus, as well as online. This material must also be saved. Following up on this situation will become the responsibility of the school counselor and principal. But all of this material has been posted on off-campus Web sites. Can the school still act? Isn't this material protected free speech? According to the established legal standard in these situations, schools can proceed with formal discipline measures if the off-campus speech has caused a substantial disruption of the school or otherwise interfered with the rights of other students. That said, the cases in which this standard has evolved relate to harmful off-campus speech directed at staff, so it's unclear how this standard would apply when the same material targets students.

School officials have a clearer case for intervention if students are using the district's network to post or distribute such material. So the principal should ask the district computer services staff to conduct an in-depth analysis of Internet use by students who are suspected to be involved in bullying. But in our hypothetical case, we already know that the cyberbullying is hampering Sara's ability to participate effectively at school. Moreover, Sara's posts indicate that harmful activities have occurred on campus. Clearly, the school is justified in responding.

Is Molly's work done? Consider this question: How well do most school counselors and administrators understand how youth use the Internet? I believe it is essential for schools to involve librarians in efforts to address cyberbullying for two reasons. First, students are most likely to engage in casual Internet use in the library or media center, where media specialists are responsible for supervision. It is during this period that incidents of cyberbullying are likely to be detected. And as among the most savvy staff members regarding kids' Internet habits, librarians are a valuable resource for helping inform teachers, as well as parents, about issues regarding the Web.

# CRUEL WORDS

**Flaming.** Directing angry and vulgar language against another, akin to fighting online.

**Harassment.** Sending offensive, rude, and insulting messages repeatedly.

**Denigration.** "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting cruel gossip about a person to damage his or her reputation.

**Impersonation.** Breaking into someone's e-mail account, posing as that person, and sending messages to make the person look bad or get him or her into trouble.

**Outing.** Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.

**Exclusion.** Excluding someone from an online group, like a "buddy list."

**Cyberstalking.** Sending messages intended to threaten or intimidate someone.



While the counselor and principal focus on providing counseling support for Sara and related discipline issues, the librarian can help deal with the harmful material itself. All of it needs to be removed. The site that hosted the cyberbullying is likely to have a terms-of-use agreement prohibiting damaging posts. Molly can help Sara's parents file a complaint with the site to have the material removed. Sara's own revealing entries must also be deleted so as not to attract dangerous predators trolling online for vulnerable youth.

Molly may also assist the counselor and principal in advising the parents of both Sara and the cyberbullies with respect to better managing their children's Internet use at home. These parents must understand the importance of consistently reviewing everything that their children post in public online communities or Web sites. In situations where children have violated trust by engaging in harmful behavior or when they appear vulnerable, I strongly recommend the installation of monitoring software on the home computer. Here, too, a librarian can provide the parents with needed assistance.

Finally, Molly might consider scheduling a parent's workshop about cyberbullying, especially if she is responsible for instructing students about Internet safety. A related tool, "A Parent's Guide to Cyberbullying," is available as a PowerPoint presentation. You can download it at [cyberbully.org](http://cyberbully.org).

While the Internet has certainly proved to be a valuable tool, there is, indeed, a dark side. Students need consistent guidance in safely navigating the Web, and librarians can play a critical role, helping youngsters make responsible choices online—while remaining alert to potential cyber abuse.

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